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ABSTRACT

The report describes the development and accomplishments of the Early Start Preschool Program (Vineland, New Jersey), a project to overcome developmental delays in communication and learning through a structured curriculum, parent training and participation, and a model nutrition program. Six outcome objectives, including objectives of gain in areas of deficit and communication skills, and prospective placement in a less restrictive environment are evaluated. Among conclusions, implications, and recommendations listed are that structure, discipline, and routine in the school program appeared to be important in achieving developmental objectives; that deficits in communication, speech, and learning exhibited by preschoolers of average intelligence may be largely remediated by a well planned, carefully structured intervention program; and that successful training for parents may require many opportunities scheduled each month to accommodate families. (CL)

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A PRESCHOOL PROGRAM TO IMPROVE THE READINESS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS FOR THE BASIC SKILLS IN COMMUNICATION AND COMPUTATION: A RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FOLLOW THROUGH PROJECT

by

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In the Vineland Public Schools, a large percentage of kindergarten children of average intelligence were being identified as moderate or high risks for placement in the regular communication and computation curriculum. In essence, this meant that the identified children were not ready for kindergarten and even the positive influence of a comprehensive kindergarten readiness curriculum was not sufficient to overcome the communication delays and learning disabilities which had accrued to the children from birth to age five. Typically, these moderate or high risk children faced the prospect of:

1. Retention in kindergarten
2. Placement in a transitional first grade
3. Placement (Social Promotion) by virtue of size or age in a regular first grade

However, despite the individual assistance provided in each of the three listed alternatives for these communication and learning disabled children of average intelligence, eventually many were referred to the Special Services Department for evaluation and possible placement in a class for the handicapped. Still more were eligible for Compensatory Education Services in reading and mathematics because they did not master basic communication and computation skills as mandated by the New Jersey Public Education Act of 1975.

Statistically, and in large part because of developmental delays in communication and/or learning, more than four of every ten students enrolled in kinder-

garten classes in Vineland were destined for either Special Class placement or for a Compensatory Education program. Thus, special needs were a matter of great concern to the parents and to the educators of the district. Therefore, in the search for a program to alleviate the developmental lags in communication and computation of this large number of children, the Early Start Preschool experimental project was instituted for the 1979-1980 school year.

This Early Start Preschool Program was designed to overcome developmental delays in communication and learning by:

1. Use of a structured curriculum. The Marshalltown Curriculum and the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile were selected for this purpose. Both instruments are interlocking with cross-referencing in skill categories. Also, each profile teaching item is matched numerically to incremental behavioral objectives and strategies in respective prescriptive guides.
2. Parent Training and Participation. The parent involvement program for this preschool was a partnership between the home and the school. To initiate this partnership, each parent was asked to sign the Early Start Preschool Parent Participation Contract. The parents were involved in the planning and the implementation of educational activities in the child's Individual Education Program (IEP). This design meshed perfectly with the Marshalltown curriculum which included the weekly prescription left in the home by the teacher for the parents to use with the child.
3. A Nutrition Program. A model nutrition program was designed for the Early Start Preschool Project. This program included:
   a. A nutritious balanced lunch for each preschool child each day.
   b. Nutrition instruction for the students presented in class and during the lunch period by the teacher.

c. Nutrition instruction for the parents conducted at special workshops and during the home visits by the teacher.

In addition to these three primary strategies the Early Start Preschool project included consultation meetings, a project logo, a publicity program, a screening and selection of children program, a staff selection process, an in-service education program for the staff, an evaluation of the staff program, special classroom floor plans, procedures for the ordering of supplies and equipment, a special newsletter for the parents, and a transportation program for all students. The project was sponsored by the Vineland Board of Education and funded through Public Law 94-142.

During the course of the 1979-1980 school year records were maintained to measure the success of each aspect of the Early Start Preschool Project including:

1. The achievement of the time line of activities
2. The signing of the contract by each family whose child was in the program
3. The Attendance Record of Preschool Parents at workshops, meetings, and home visits
4. The Menu Report Survey to ascertain the improvement in each child's menu from September through March
5. The Marshalltown pre and post testing to ascertain any improvement which a child achieved in communication, motor, and/or social skills
6. An evaluation of the program by the parents in October, January, and March to ascertain the parents' opinions of the program

Finally a program to insure the institutionalization and dissemination of the project was planned to include:

1. The involvement of administrators, supervisors, and staff members of the school district

2. Information provided to the staff of the school system concerning the Early Start Preschool Project
3. A publicity campaign to enlist the support of the parents in the community for the Early Start Preschool
4. The sharing of products or ideas such as the ESP newsletter for parents which might be useful for other programs
5. Articles about the project in the local press, radio, and TV
6. The production of a slide-tape documentary of the Early Start Preschool
7. The placement of a copy of the Early Start Preschool report in the Reference Library of Educational Improvement Center South so that the information could be available for state, national, and international reference

ACHIEVEMENT OF EARLY START PRESCHOOL PROJECT OUTCOME OBJECTIVES

The first outcome objective of this pilot project was as follows:

> Seventy-five percent (75%) of the eight preschool students in the program who are of average intelligence and who are classified as learning disabled shall demonstrate a gain of one year in development in the areas of deficit[1] as determined by the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile administered as the pre test in September 1979 and again as the post test in March 1980.*

In order to measure the attainment of this objective, the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile was administered as the pre and post test by the Classroom teacher to each Early Start Preschool student categorized as learning disabled. The resultant information for each student was compiled and an analysis of this data revealed that during the project:

Seven students or 87.5 percent gained two months or more for each month in school in Communication Age

Three students or 37.5 percent gained two months or more for each month in school in Motor Age

Three students or 37.5 percent gained two months or more for each month in school in Social Age

Six students or 75 percent gained two months or more for each month in school in Mean Age

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[1]An area of deficit is a measurable lag in development in the communication, motor, and/or social skills. Reference.
Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile (Marshalltown, Iowa: The Marshalltown Project, 1978). Unnumbered.

*Clarification for the reader: The Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile pre test was given 10 September 1979 (or when a late enrollee entered the program). The Marshalltown Developmental Profile post test was given 11 March 1980. Hence, during the first six months of this pilot program each student was expected to demonstrate a gain of two months in the areas of deficit for each month in school.

Although 75 percent of the students did gain two or more months of development for each month in school in the deficit areas of communication and mean age, this objective was not achieved as written. To have achieved the objective as written, 75 percent of the students would have had to gain two months of development in each area (communication, motor, social, and mean age) of deficit identified by the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile. As specified, only 37.5 percent of the students gained two or more months of development in motor and social age.

Objective two was similar to objective one, except that it was designed for those Early Start Preschool students with communication deficits as follows:

> Seventy-five percent (75%) of the nine preschool students who are of average intelligence and who are classified as communication handicapped shall demonstrate a gain of one year in development in communication skills as determined by the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile administered as the pre test in September 1979 and again as the post test in March 1980.

In order to assess the achievement of this objective, the Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile was administered as the pre and post test by the classroom teacher to each Early Start Preschool student categorized as having a communication deficit. The resultant information for each student was compiled and an analysis of this data revealed that during the project:

> Eight children or 88.9 percent gained two months or more for each month in school in Communication Age

Thus, objective two was achieved and the results were substantially greater than the projections of the objective for this pilot project.

Objective three stipulated that:

> One Parent or guardian of each of the seventeen preschool students shall attend at least three parent training sessions during the project period from September 1979 through March 1980 as recorded on

the Parent Education Attendance Record to be maintained by the classroom teacher.

The data for this objective was collected by designing and using the Vineland Public Schools Early Start Preschool Parent Education Attendance Record form. An analysis of the data revealed that 100 percent of the parents (at least one parent or guardian of each Early Start Preschool student) attended three parent training sessions. In fact, one hundred percent of the parents attended four or more sessions and 88 percent attended five or more sessions. Hence, this objective was achieved. It appears important to observe that not only was this objective achieved well-beyond the original projections of the author, but also that parent attendance at training sessions actually increased during the course of the Early Start Preschool pilot project.

Objective four which was designed to evaluate the nutrition program impact stated that:

> All (100%) of the seventeen preschool students shall eat a balanced breakfast, lunch, and dinner by March 1980 as ascertained by a Menu Report Survey conducted and completed by the classroom teacher as the pre test in September 1979 and again as the post test in March 1980.

The pre and post menu information needed for each student in order to accurately evaluate the achievement of this objective was written by the teachers on an Early Start Preschool Menu Report Survey designed by this writer. This menu Report Survey for each child was analyzed by a committee comprised of the Chief School Nurse, the Supervisor of Food Services, the child's teacher, and the writer. Any recorded menu was designated to be satisfactory if at least three of the four committee members, working independently, judged the menu to be satisfactory. An analysis of the data revealed that:

1. Two or 25 percent of the students categorized as learning disabled had a need for improvement in one or more of the daily meals based on the initial survey results

2. Three or 33 percent of the students categorized as communication handicapped had a need for improvement in one or more of the daily meals based on the initial survey results
3. All of the students in each category (learning disabled and communication handicapped) were eating satisfactorily balanced meals based on the post survey results.

Therefore, the analysis of the relevant data verified that the fourth objective was attained.

Objective five was:

> Seventy-five percent (75%) of the seventeen preschool students enrolled in the program during September 1979 shall be removed from the category, "eligible for preschool handicapped" to the category, "will benefit from the least restrictive program" by a Child Study Team review of each student's progress completed on or before March 30, 1980.

The Vineland Public Schools Child Study Team assigned to this pilot project was responsible to evaluate the information gathered during the Screening Program and to categorize any child who qualified for the Early Start Preschool program as "eligible for preschool handicapped." This same team was responsible to reevaluate each student during March 1980, and to categorize any student who was no longer in need of the Early Start Preschool program per se as one who "will benefit from the least restrictive program."

As objective data for the reevaluation process the Child Study Team used:

1. The Marshalltown Behavioral Developmental Profile for each child
2. Teacher, Child Study Team, and this writer's comments
3. Parent conference information
4. Anecdotal observations and notes contained in the student permanent record folder

Examination and evaluation of the aforementioned data by the Child Study Team indicated that seventeen students or 100 percent attained the category

"will benefit from the least restrictive program" by March 1980. Of this total, eight or 100 percent of the students with learning disabilities and nine or 100 percent of the students with communication deficits achieved the new category. Therefore, this objective was achieved by 100 percent of each group of students - the learning disabled and the communication handicapped.

The final (sixth) outcome objective for the Early Start Preschool stated that:

> Seventy-five percent (75%) of the seventeen preschool students enrolled in the program during September 1979 shall be declared "on target in readiness for the mainstream kindergarten program designed to prepare the child for introduction to the basic skills in computation and communication" by a Child Study Team review of each student's progress completed on or before March 30, 1980.

With regard to this objective, the Child Study Team was responsible to analyze the rate of progress of each Early Start Preschool student during March 1980 and to declare "on target in readiness for the mainstream kindergarten program designed to prepare the child for introduction to the basic skills in computation and communication" each student who had achieved those child development skills at least equal to the average preschool population. An analysis of the data revealed that fourteen Early Start Preschool students or 82 percent were found to be "on target in readiness for the mainstream kindergarten program." Five or 63 percent of the learning disabled students and nine or 100 percent of the communication handicapped students had achieved the needed skills for this prognosis. Thus, objective six was achieved as originally written and was attained by a majority of the learning disabled and all of the communication handicapped students.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

"A Preschool Program to Improve the Readiness of Children with Special Needs for the Basic Skills in Communication and Computation: A Research and Development Follow Through Project" provided substantive evidence to support the thesis that young children who exhibit learning disabilities or deficits in communication and/or speech may be able to overcome such deficiencies if provided a carefully planned early intervention program which includes a structured curriculum, proper nutrition, and parent training/involvement. In addition to this major tenet which is supported by the project, several attendant and/or unanticipated (side effect) conclusions were synthesized based upon the data analysis and parent evaluations:

1. After participating in the Early Start Preschool strategies for six months, approximately 75 percent of the learning disabled students enrolled may demonstrate a gain of two or more months for each month of participation in two areas of development:
   a. Communication Age*
   b. Mean Age*
2. Based on the analysis of data from the Early Start Preschool, it does not appear possible to have 75 percent of the learning disabled students gain two or more months in every area of deficit for each month of participation in this program. Although 75

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*Note - Terminology excerpted from the Marshalltown Behavioral Development Profile.

percent of the students achieved this objective for communication and mean ages, only 37.5 percent of the students made such an achievement in motor and social ages.

3. After participating in the Early Start Preschool strategies for six months, more than 75 percent of the communication and/or speech deficient students enrolled may be expected to demonstrate a gain of two or more months in communication age for each month of participation in the program.
4. Based on the demonstrated gains of the students, it appears that the strategies of the Early Start Preschool are excellent to stimulate extraordinary improvement in communication, speech, and mean age of the learning disabled and/or the communication handicapped preschool child. Equally successful techniques need to be discovered to effect a similar extraordinary improvement in the motor and social age areas.
5. Parents of a preschool learning disabled or communication deficient child will participate in a comprehensive parent training program offered both at the school and in the home on a regularly scheduled basis.
6. A scientifically engineered nutrition program which provides a balanced lunch for the student each school day, encouragement and rationale for the student to eat nutritious foods, and literature and workshops about nutrition for the parents tends to increase the number of nutritious foods which a student selects to eat during meals and for snacks.
7. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who is designated as "eligible for preschool handicapped" cl s and who partici-

pates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year tends to progress sufficiently well (in communication, motor, and social age) to attain the "will benefit from the least restrictive program" category when reviewed by the Child Study Team.

8. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year tends to progress sufficiently well (in communication, motor, social, and mean age) to be declared "on target in readiness for the mainstream kindergarten program designed to prepare the child for introduction to the basic skills in computation and communication" when reviewed by the Child Study Team.
9. The structured curriculum and the standardized, scheduled, daily routine of the Early Start Preschool appear to benefit the three, four, and five year-of-age child.
10. Structure, discipline, and routine in the school program seem to be key strategies in order to achieve the improvement in communication, motor, and social age predicted by the outcome objectives of this project.
11. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year improves in behaviors observed by the parents such as dressing, putting on shoes, apologizing, setting the table, and answering the telephone.
12. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year achieves substantial improvement in his/her speech habits.
13. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year improves his/her coordination as evidenced by printing capital letters,

walking tiptoe, tying a knot, building a simple toy, and riding a tricycle.

14. Parents who enroll a child in the Early Start Preschool program overwhelmingly:
    a. Recommend the program to other parents
    b. Believe that the numbe of parent workshops (three per month) is sufficient
    c. Believe that the topics selected for the ESP parent workshops are appropriate
    d. Like the school lunch program
15. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year may learn to eat foods that s/he did not eat before enrollment in the program including:
    a. Salad
    b. Fruit
    c. Vegetables
    d. Variety of sandwiches
16. Nutritional deprivation of an Early Start Preschool child is more likely to result from a refusal on the part of the child to eat the balanced meals and nutritious snacks rather than from a lack of adequate or appropriate meals in the home.
17. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program for one school year tends to learn to eat nutritious snacks instead of candy, cake, or cookies.
18. Parents who have a child enrolled in the Early Start Preschool program tend to support, without reservation, each strategy of the project.

19. Staff selection and staff training appear to be very much more important to the successful achievement of the Early Start Preschool objectives than was anticipated when the author designed these as support strategies.

20. The extraordinary, structured stimulation afforded by the Early Start Preschool strategies improves substantially the child's self-concept as well as his/her communication and mean age growth.

Implications

Several implications which warrant serious consideration in the ongoing quest to produce meaningful educational experiences for each student are suggested by an examination of the measurement, evaluation, and conclusion data revealed and/or demonstrated during this action project.

1. Deficits in communication, speech, and learning exhibited by preschool children of average intelligence may be largely remediated by a well-planned, carefully structured intervention program.
2. An early intervention educational program for children, such as the Early Start Preschool, may eliminate the need to classify a child as handicapped and/or to label a child as learning disabled, communication handicapped, etc. For example, in this project, an enrollee was declared "eligible for preschool handicapped" by the Child Study Team; however, no child was further labeled. After only six months in the program, the Child Study Team found that all of the children enrolled in the Early Start Preschool program "would benefit from the least restrictive program" thus eliminating any need to ever officially label these students.
3. An early intervention educational program, such as the Early Start Preschool, may assist the student to achieve sufficient growth in communication, motor, and social skills so that s/he is ready for the regular kindergarten program along with his/her peers. When such favorable progress occurs, the child will be able to learn the basic communication and computation skills along with all kindergarten pupils and will not need to be referred to the Child Study

Team for evaluation and possible classification (labeling).

4. Contrary to the somewhat commonly espoused notion that parent participation is impossible to cultivate, the findings of this project suggest that every parent will participate in some aspect of a meaningful, regularly scheduled parent training program which is flexible enough to be conducted in the home for at least one-third of the schedule.
5. The weight of evidence from this project seems to support the idea that virtually all parents are interested in the education and welfare of the child and many parents are willing to assist as volunteers and as members of the PTA to implement and make successful a program such as the Early Start Preschool.
6. While it is possible to establish a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) at the preschool level, the implication derived from the Early Start Preschool PTA experience is that parents do need assistance in organizing a PTA and also in planning and carrying out a PTA program. In this regard, administrators must be willing to devote time and skill to nurture and help the PTA.
7. A successful training program for parents may require that many workshop opportunities be planned and conducted each month in order to accommodate the schedule of each family. For example, in order to achieve the parent training objective with the seventeen families in this project, it was necessary to conduct a minimum of one program each month in the following locations:
   a. The home of the child
   b. The South Vineland School (site of the project)
   c. The Board of Education Office Complex

8. In any parent training strategy, a home program may be necessary to reach 100 percent of the families. For example, of the seventeen families directly affected by this project, four families could not have achieved the objective of attendance at three programs had the home program not been provided.
9. Literature sent to the parents of a learning disabled or communication handicapped child may be less effective than the presentation of the same literature at a parent training workshop. This implication was derived from a preschool parent and may be attributed to the fact that, without formal instruction, parents can easily overlook significant suggestions contained in literature.
10. It may be possible to coordinate Early Start Preschool parent training activities with other school system parent training programs which have similar objectives for efficiency and to reach a larger audience per session. The several such cooperative meetings conducted during this pilot project proved to be very successful.
11. A scientifically engineered nutrition program which includes a nutritious lunch and snack at school, nutrition instruction for the preschool students, and nutrition materials and instruction for the parents does seem to effect improved eating habits on the part of the students.
12. A learning disabled or communication handicapped child who participates in the Early Start Preschool program is likely to learn to eat more nutritious foods. This may also imply that other preschool children would also learn to eat more nutritious foods if provided with the opportunity of a program similar to the nutrition strategies employed in this project.

13. It may be implied from an analysis of the data acquired in this project that nutritional deprivation of the preschool child frequently occurs because the child does not eat nutritious foods rather than because s/he does not have such foods or a balanced menu.
14. The scientifically engineered nutrition program for preschool children required a minimum of one-half hour each school day; hence, a three hour per day preschool program may be justified.
15. A series of professionally planned staff inservice programs appears to be a very effective method for teaching tenure staff members about a different curriculum such as the Marshalltown Project which demands the use of structure and parent involvement. The Early Start Preschool staff had such an inservice program and, in January, 1980, the Early Start Preschool teachers each reported structure to be one of the successful techniques of this pilot project.
16. Even though at the outset of a preschool project teachers may appear willing to accept voluntary responsibilities such as the publication of an Early Start Preschool Newsletter and participation in a series of workshops for parents, the project director should exercise discretion in making such assignments. The weight of evidence from this pilot program suggests that once the classes and home program are in operation, the teachers are unable to simultaneously complete other voluntary responsibilities.
17. In order to replicate the success of the Early Start Preschool, the researcher may be well-advised to observe that a variety of support in addition to the teaching, administrative and Child Study Team staff was necessary to implement the strategies of this project including:

a. Community persons (pediatricians, nutritionists, dentists, optometrists)

b. Clerical assistance

c. Art and media personnel

d. Xeroxing and/or printing capacity

e. Local, state, and national professional educators and educational organizations

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, implications, parent evaluations, and comments of the Early Start Preschool project observers the following recommendations are tendered:

1. Learning disabled and communication handicapped students achieved substantial improvement in communication skills and mean age as well as significant improvement in motor and social skills as a result of participation in the Early Start Preschool strategies. Therefore, the program should be adapted and similiar strategies made available for the preschool child exhibiting those deficits which tend to categorize the child as:
   a. Educable mentally retarded
   b. Emotionally disturbed
   c. Orthopedically handicapped
   d. Hearing impaired
   e. Visually impaired
   f. Cerebral palsy
   g. Brain damaged
   h. Slow learner
2. Next, and accruing from recommendation number one, the Early Start Preschool program should include all preschool children who exhibit deficits in communication, motor, and/or social skills. Because of budgetary considerations, such a program would likely have to be phased into the school system over a period of time. Therefore, the early stages of such a phasing in process should accommodate those

children exhibiting the greatest need.

3. As soon as the budget permits, the Early Start Preschool program should be made available to every three, four, and five year old child whether or not the child exhibits a deficit in communication, motor, and/or social skills.
4. The Annual Kindergarten Round-Up should be discontinued and an Early Start Preschool Round-Up should be instituted for the purpose of screening all three year-of-age children. Such a program would identify those children who are eligible for the Early Start Preschool and would simultaneously "round-up" most other children for planning purposes, two years prior to the kindergarten admission age.
5. The Early Start Preschool staff inservice education summer program to address curriculum and nutrition education topics should be increased from three days to one week.
6. The Early Start Preschool staff inservice education program should be designed for all preschool and kindergarten personnel in the school system, and all preschool kindergarten educators in the county should be invited to attend. As a result of such an inservice education plan, the staff of each school would be familiar with the Early Start Preschool program including the curriculum, nutrition, and parent training strategies.
7. The Early Start Preschool nutrition program should be continued and a specialized training program should be designed to familiarize the staff members with more successful techniques for teaching a child to increase the variety of foods s/he will eat.
8. In order to more adequately accommodate the Early Start Preschool structured curriculum and nutrition program objectives, the schedule

should be increased to three hours per session. This schedule would allocate two and one-half hours for teaching formal communication, motor, and social skills and one-half hour for conducting the nutrition program each school day.

9. The Child Study Team Social Worker should be designated as the professional staff member responsible to plan and implement the Early Start Preschool parent training. A minimum of three parent training opportunities per month should be continued and the schedule of programs for the next school year should be completed and published by June of the prior school year.
10. The membership of the Parent Teacher Association should be provided with at least three opportunities to recommend topics for the Early Start Preschool parent training program of the next school year.
11. The parents of all preschool and kindergarten children in the school system should be invited to attend the Early Start Preschool parent training programs.
12. The Marshalltown structured curriculum strategy of the Early Start preschool should be adopted for all district preschool and kindergarten classes.
13. The Early Start Preschool parent coordinator and the PTA should share equally in the responsibility to publish the monthly ESP Newsletter for parents. Also, this newsletter strategy should be allocated funding for printing costs.
14. The New Jersey special education regulations concerning the classification of children should be reevaluated in view of the conclusions and implications of this project. Classification usually results in the "labeling" of a child - sometimes for a lifetime. Therefore

classification and labeling, especially of the preschool child, should be discontinued; and the classification practice should be replaced by a procedure wherein the child is declared "eligible for preschool handicapped" by the Child Study Team.

15. Additional funding sources should be sought to make available the Early Start Preschool strategies for all preschool children. To complement the Public Law 94-142 funding for preschool programs for the handicapped; Emergency School Aid Act, Title I, Title VII, and Title XX regulations need to be reviewed along with local and state aid in the ongoing search for additional preschool program financial support.